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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 003221

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SUBJECT: DEATH OF FORMER PRC LEADER HUA GUOFENG QUIETLY
NOTED BY CHINESE MEDIA AND PUBLIC

REF: A. OSC CPP20080820172005
¶B. OSC CPP20080820074001

Classified By: Political Internal Unit Chief
Dan Kritenbrink. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) The August 20 death of former PRC leader Hua Guofeng, a transitional figure between Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, was covered quietly and carefully by Mainland Chinese media. Embassy contacts downplayed the significance of Hua's death, noting he had not held a position of real political importance since 1981, when he was forced from power by Deng Xiaoping. Nevertheless, contacts say Hua's passing will likely lead to further public reflection on China's post-Mao path, particularly in this 30th anniversary year of the "reform and opening" policies launched by Deng in December ¶1978. End Summary.

Hua Guofeng Dies August 20

¶12. (U) Hua Guofeng, who succeeded Mao Zedong as China's top leader in 1976 before being outmaneuvered by Deng Xiaoping shortly thereafter and forced to relinquish his final positions of real power in 1981, died on August 20. The news of his death was announced via a short statement read on the August 20 CCTV evening news broadcast, which was also released in print at virtually the same time by the official Chinese news agency Xinhua. The statement, which serves as Hua's official obituary and thus the Party's final judgment of his life and career, read, "Comrade Hua Guofeng, an outstanding member of the Communist Party of China and long-tested and staunch communist fighter and proletarian revolutionary who used to hold leading posts in the Party and Government, died of illness at age 87 at 12:50 local time on August 20, 2008 after failing to respond to treatment." (See Refs A and B.)

PRC Media Adopts Low-key, Careful Stance

¶13. (C) PRC media have adopted a low-key, careful stance in reporting the news of Hua's death. Official Party dailies such as Renmin Ribao ran the brief obituary (but no other reporting on Hua's death) on their front page, but only in the lower right-hand corner, the place of least importance. Meanwhile, other papers such as the prominent metropolitan daily Xinjing Bao also ran the same short Xinhua statement, but relegated it to the inside pages (page A15 in the case of Xinjing Bao, which also neglected to run a photo of Hua, as most official newspapers had).

¶14. (C) Embassy contacts noted the "low-key" language used in the official Xinhua obituary, commenting that it was less laudatory than perhaps for any previous senior PRC leader, except for former Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. Dong

Lisheng (protect), longtime Embassy contact and Professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), told PolOff August 21 that he was struck by the obituary's omission of Hua's specific senior positions, including Party Chairman, Premier of the State Council and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, instead referring only to his having held "leading posts." Separately, Huang Shan (protect), editor at the independent magazine Caijing, on August 21 commented that, even though much of the language in the obituary consists of "cliches," it nevertheless is "much more positive" than the terse official statement made by the Communist Party at the time of Zhao Ziyang's death in 2005. Huang concluded that the "relatively positive" tone of Hua Guofeng's obituary shows that, despite his various "mistakes" that led to his downfall, the Party appreciated his having stepped aside peacefully, thus ensuring the smooth transition of power to Deng Xiaoping that led to China's current prosperity.

¶5. (C) Comment: Hua's official obituary is, in fact, significantly more positive than that issued in 2005 for Zhao Ziyang, who had been ousted in 1989 over the Tiananmen protests and remained under house arrest until his death. Hua, by contrast, was allowed to maintain certain face-saving positions after being forced to step down, including serving as a member of the CCP Central Committee until 2002. Hua was even trotted out as a "special invited guest" at the 17th Communist Party Congress opening in October 2007. Nevertheless, apparently indicating that there will be no reevaluation of the Party's judgment concerning the mistakes made by Hua Guofeng (or, for that matter, by Mao Zedong, who left Hua in charge in 1976), the language in Hua's obituary

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falls short of the praise accorded other former senior leaders. For example, compared to the obituaries of other former Party leaders, including even former Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang who was ousted from power in 1987, the language in Hua Guofeng's obituary makes no use of the apparently standard laudatory adjectives "great" (weida), "brilliant" (zhuoyue) and "remarkable" (jiechu). End Comment.

¶6. (C) PRC-owned Hong Kong newspapers, by contrast, provided fuller coverage of Hua's life and death. Wen Wei Po, for example, on August 21 carried one largely critical piece that said it was Hua's insistence on the "two whatevers" (defending whatever Mao had decided and obeying whatever Mao had instructed) that had led to his downfall. The piece cited in detail the Party's previous judgment against Hua, citing his mistakes, in addition to the "two whatevers," such as his taking an incorrect "Leftist" ideological line, obstructing the rehabilitation of former cadres after the Cultural Revolution and promoting a "cult of personality," both for Mao and for himself. The same article did, however, give Hua credit for "smashing" the "Gang of Four" and commented favorably on his having led a "tranquil political life" following relinquishment of his top positions. Other pieces in the PRC-owned Hong Kong media were more positive, with a separate article in Wen Wei Po commenting on Hua Guofeng's "democratic work style," as reportedly noted by Hu Yaobang in 1978 (and revealed in an April 2008 article by Hu Yaobang's son in Caijing magazine). Another article in the PRC-owned Ta Kung Pao positively outlined Hua's life and career, describing in detail his senior Party and Government positions following Mao's death in 1976 and calling him a "responsible politician" who helped end the Cultural Revolution by "eliminating" the Gang of Four. The same article went on to note that Hua led a largely "secluded" life after having stepped down and concluded by quoting a former senior PRC official who had once praised Hua as "a good man."

Hua's Historical Significance?

¶7. (C) Embassy contacts downplayed the significance of Hua's

death, noting he had not held a position of real political importance since 1981, but nevertheless predicted that his passing will spark further reflection upon China's post-Mao path in this 30th anniversary year of the "reform and opening" policies launched by Deng Xiaoping in December 1978.

CASS's Dong Lisheng, for example, said from a long-term historical perspective, Hua will be viewed merely as a "transitional" leader. By causing people to reflect upon the Cultural Revolution and China's recovery from it, however, Hua's death likely will lead to a brief surge in articles by intellectuals, both on the left and right, seeking to evaluate not only the Cultural Revolution, but also the successes and problems China has encountered since its conclusion. Caijing's Huang Shan believed Hua Guofeng's "greatest contribution" to China was his "stepping aside" to allow a strong leader like Deng Xiaoping assume power, which directly led to China's current success. Huang predicted that public reflection on Hua's death will be to the Party's benefit, as it will remind people just how far China has come in the three decades since Hua stepped down.

Public Reaction: "A Good Man"

¶8. (C) The Chinese public is most likely to remember Hua Guofeng as a "good man" who was loyal both to the Party and Mao Zedong, and who was "generous" in not holding grudges or seeking to "make trouble" following his ouster in 1981, something quite important to those who lived through the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, CASS's Dong told PolOff August 21. Backing up Dong's assertion, Chinese netizens who left comments on August 21 on a memorial page in honor of Hua on the Renmin Ribao website as well as on Sina.com were overwhelmingly positive, with many calling Hua a "good and honest man" who served China well, praising him for his role in crushing the Gang of Four as well as for stepping aside in favor of Deng Xiaoping. If he is to be criticized, one netizen wrote on the Renmin Ribao site, it is for being "too faithful" to Mao Zedong. Meanwhile, out on Tiananmen Square on August 21, most Chinese citizens with whom PolOff spoke were aware of Hua's death. Although younger people in their 20s and 30s were largely uninterested in discussing Hua's passing, several elderly Beijing residents separately praised Hua's long record of service, again concluding that he will be remembered as "a good man."

RANDT